

Second Fiddle

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Summary: Barney Calhoun is normally happy to play a supportive role. But in a darker moment, his buried resentment directs itself at one person-Gordon. A character study of everyone's favorite security guard.

Second Fiddle

**AN-I know, I know, this has taken forever for me to publish. And I know it's about Barney, and I know it's depressing, but I was determined to get this thing finished and set that as my rule for publishing anything else. There's also a fluffy Gordon/Alyx one I'm uploading now that I think more people will be happy with. Honestly, I'm pretty annoyed at this fic myself because it wouldn't get finished. I've never understood how an artist could dislike one of their creations, because usually I'm proud of mine and all like, "They're my babies!" ...but this one has been grinding my nerves. I now know what Mary Shelley meant when she called her novel "my hideous progeny". Fun Fact: I checked the date on the file this was being kept in on my computer, and I started it on January 24th 2011. Go me for taking a whole year to write a fanfic! My excuse is that at the time, I was first writing an undergrad thesis, applying to grad schools and graduating. Then I took a semester off-in which I promised myself I'd write LOADS of fanfiction...hahaha!-but in reality had to work, and it was a job in retail, and I quickly got promoted to full-time, meaning I was on my feet all day dealing with horrible people, so when I came home I was exhausted and didn't want to do anything but cuddle with cats and sleep. Then, while the retail holiday season was going on, I was preparing for grad school, preparing to move out of my house, and getting ready to turn in my two-weeks' notice. That all cascaded into a wonderful mishmash of about three weeks starting at the beginning of January where I went crazy leaving my job, moving out of my one house to my mom's house across the state, packed up there and got ready to move to another state, moved to the other state, got set up here at grad school, and now here I am. Considering I managed to write this, a 26-page fic on

why it sucks to be Barney Calhoun, and another fic in that amount of time, I'm actually feeling slightly less annoyed with myself and almost a little proud. But yeah, that's why it's taken so long, and I know that, in reality, it sucks. Sorry about that, here it is now.**

I couldn't have done it, though, without some help. JSF16 has been diligently nagging me to write, as I asked anybody who cared to, and then generously beta-ed this fic for me. Thank you, JSF16! A few other people nagged me too, and for that I am genuinely thankful because it shows you care...and because it makes me write, lol. Thank you to the people I've met on other websites who have said they liked my work they read here—you folks are awesome! And thank you to you, dear reader, if you manage to make it through this whole thing, and especially if you leave a review. :-)

So what I was trying to do here is basically just a character study of Barney. He's a very compelling character, in my opinion, and when he's done right in fanfiction, the outcome's great—I've noticed, just by hanging around the fandom, that he's probably a more universally-well-liked character than either Gordon or Alyx, believe it or not! (People sometimes get annoyed by Alyx and sometimes people think Gordon's a jerk, but I've only ever seen one person who didn't like Barney, and they were probably never hugged as a child.) What I find funny is that a lot of people have very similar ideas on him, actually—it seems to be a phenomenon in Half-Life fanfiction that people generally have very similar ideas of characters with very little to go on, which I find interesting. People recognize that he's not strictly comic relief, and he does seem to have layers to him. I like to think of him as the Severus Snape of Half-Life in that sense (including the fangirls. I'm sorry, sweeties, but Barney Calhoun fangirls remind me a lot of Snapewives. Y'all are a little weird, but we love you nonetheless.;-p). I kinda got the inspiration from Ron Weasley in the Deathly Hallows book, brooding about being a beta male. My idea here is that Barney's really resentful of Eli for dying on him, but he can't deal with that just yet, so he transfers it onto Gordon. A good beta male is fine with being in a supporting role, but a person can only take so much. Barney's not all cat phobias and beer jokes, he's got his own stuff going on too. That's what I wanted to explore with this.

Anyway, I've made this Author's Note long enough, go read.

Barney Calhoun lay in the hospital bed, hearing the hum of the machinery monitoring his vitals, every fiber of his body hurting and his mind miserable. As he glared at the ceiling, his jaw jutted outward in what would be described, in a child, as a pout, he sulked in the way only a man past his prime and aware of it can. He had spent half of his lifetime fighting the Combine, and now that the war was clearly coming to an end, he wasn't sure what was left for him, what that end would be, how everything would play out, and what work was still ahead of them. But he knew it would require work—societies didn't rebuild themselves—and he was tired, so damn _weary_, that he just wanted to lie here and take out his frustration on the world.

The train he had been riding out of City 17 had just made it past the blast radius of the Citadel explosion, but immediately afterward, portal storms started breaking out like they had after the Resonance

Cascade and before the Combine came. The blast that Alyx and Gordon had witnessed upon climbing from the wreckage of their getaway train had diminished in power by the time it reached Barney's still-traveling one, but had overturned the cars nonetheless. No one had been killed, just banged up, and Barney led them on foot the rest of the way to White Forest.

They never made it, though; about 15 miles from the base, they'd encountered a straggling bunch of CPs. Despite the fact that there were more of Barney's people than there were CPs, the Metrocops were better armed and better trained, the civilians panicking and not following orders. What should have been an easy skirmish turned into a fight they only barely got away from by the skin of their teeth.

Except they hadn't. Not all of them.

When the CPs called for reinforcements, Barney knew that what group they had would never hold up against the renewed onslaught, and with the Combine toadies so close to the Rebel base, Barney had made a strategic decision. The CPs had immediately recognized him—"after he'd made his true colors clear, what was left of Civil Protection had sent out bulletins to their men alerting them to him, and even in the battle for City 17, he'd been a hot target"—so they had made it clear he was their priority. So, in order to save the base and the rest of the party he was leading, Barney had allowed himself to be captured by the Combine.

Barney had hoped they wouldn't get far before he was rescued, and when he was held in the remains of an old underground bunker the Combine were using as a headquarters, he'd still hoped it wouldn't be long before he was hauled out by either a horde of his Rebel friends, or the guy who seemed to do most of the heroics nowadays, his old friend Gordon Freeman. Gordon had come for him, sure enough, but it had taken them a whole eight days to realize he was in danger, locate him, and devise a plan for rescue. Gordon and Alyx had stormed the headquarters with a small band of rebels, retaken Barney, and laid waste to the Combine holing up there.

But eight days in Combine captivity had taken their toll on Barney. He had been prepared to hold out from giving up any Resistance secrets he could, but the low-level CPs who made up the majority of the Combine personnel in the bunker weren't interested in information. He had betrayed them, as they saw it, making fools of them to give their information to the Resistance. He had paraded under their noses for years without being caught, showcasing their incompetence and undermining their strictly-enforced discipline, and his spying had resulted in the deaths of some of their colleagues at the hands of the Rebels.

Barney knew the remaining Metrocops probably resented that he'd been stronger than them, and instead of selling out to the alien invaders, had infiltrated them, and were taking out their suppressed disgust at themselves on him—"and in the heat of a beating, he'd told them so, earning him a blow to the head that had knocked him unconscious for hours"—but a secure conscience didn't protect him from the CPs' wrath. In addition to the special resentment people hold for spies and turncoats, they knew now that he was connected to both the Vances, some of the top scientists in the Resistance, and to the big fish himself, Gordon Freeman, Anticitizen Number One. If they

couldn't get their hands on any of these troublesome targets, the Combine were perfectly happy to take out their ire on Barney, right-hand man and old buddy to so many in the Resistance, and make an example of him for the other Rebels to see.

Barney didn't know if his captors had let White Forest know they had him and used him as bait to lure in a rescue party they could then kill off, or if they had merely been content to use him as their own personal punching-bag as they waited out the uncertainty of the Combine's position on Earth now that the uprising was in full swing. Knowing CPs the way Barney did, he didn't even think they'd have the brains to think of the former strategy—"people who signed up to be Metrocops were either mindless thugs to begin with, or learned to be to survive. All he knew was that he'd barely been fed or given water except to keep him alive long enough that they could abuse him some more, he'd been kept in a dark room, his clothing getting increasingly ragged with beatings and not replaced, and he'd been tortured for the Combine's amusement.

It hadn't been anything elaborate or sophisticated—"Barney had always studied war tactics and knew that what these guys were coming up with had nothing on the average pre-war third-world dictator"—but even if they weren't elaborate methods designed to extract information, they still hurt. He'd been beaten with fists and what he suspected were metal pipes, stun sticks, chunks of wood and lengths of chain; he'd been almost-drowned several times with his head in a toilet bowl—"where Rebels belonged, they said"—run through with jolts of electricity, and left outdoors in the cold all night once with only his shredded clothing for warmth, chained up like a dog. The CPs weren't privy to the more advanced forms of torture used at Nova Prospekt, but they had enough on-the-job training with Combine technology that they improvised a little. Nothing that would leave him permanently disabled, or so the Resistance doctors who were patching him up told him, but he'd have some interesting scars. One of their cleverer methods had involved playing recordings of a headcrab in his cell all night long, making him think he was about to be zombified, and in the morning they had laughed at him that of course they wouldn't let an actual headcrab run around the bunker, threatening them as well. Another time they'd made him actually swallow fistfuls of dirt to degrade him, the rocky soil cutting his mouth and grinding his esophagus as it went down, only to sit heavily in his stomach, going nowhere, until he'd eventually vomited it up hours later.

And then they'd gotten creative.

Barney was used to being a beta male, the second fiddle to somebody else in everything he did. He didn't resent it in the slightest; his job was vital, and this was the way he was comfortable operating. He made valuable contributions and normally didn't need that much recognition; he didn't need to be hailed a hero and have parades held in his honor when he did something necessary, he was happy to act in a supporting role. But even though he normally felt that way, being tortured for eight days will make anybody want to be appreciated for their sacrifices. Still, if it had merely been his recent experiences, he might have been able to hold up.

But when he'd gotten back to the base, he found out why Alyx had been acting differently during the rescue mission and as they transported him back to safety. She had been unusually vicious and reckless in

fighting the Combine at the bunker, as if this was something personal. And of course it was, with the Combine it always was, but Alyx normally kept her head no matter what the situation. She had been fiercely determined to protect Barney and cause as many Combine casualties personally as she could, and on the ride home, she had clung to him and fussed over him, then grown quiet and despondent. When they'd made it back, Barney had been debriefed while lying in a hospital bed, with Drs. Magnusson and Kleiner, a few medical doctors, and Gordon and Alyx present. When Barney had interrupted to ask where Eli was, everyone grew silent and shot glances at each other awkwardly. No one had wanted to be the one to break the news to him, but Dr. Magnusson eventually had, in the gentlest way Barney had ever seen him handle anything: Eli was dead. He had been killed by Advisors, right in front of Alyx and Gordon, who would have been killed too if they hadn't been lucky. Alyx's forced facade of resilience had then broken momentarily and she'd had to cover her face with a hand and let out a few dry sobs as Gordonâ€"wonder of all wonders, was Supernerdy finally taking the hint that Alyx was attracted to him?â€"put his arm around her.

At the news of the loss of Eli, Barney had finally crumbled. He'd been struggling to hold onto his sanity for eight days, and prior to that he'd spent a week exhausting himself fighting in the streets of City 17. He had desperately held out hope that if he could just keep his mind in one piece until he could get back to White Forest, he'd be surrounded by people who cared about him, who would nurture him back to health and he could just get some rest and finally stop all the running around he'd been doing, maybe even enjoy the fruits of the last 20 years...

...and when he got the news, he couldn't handle any more. He'd been past his breaking point for too long already, and still struggling to keep the mask up. When that blow hit him, he could no longer maintain himself and had finally broken down.

It hadn't been quite a...psychological break, or psychotic episode or whatever...he'd just gone into a hysterical rage, shouting God-only-knew what at the people around him, tears streaming from his eyes as he demanded that everybody get away from him as they struggled to keep him lying down. To his displeasure, this had only brought more people to himâ€"more doctors, as they all rushed in to see why his vitals were skyrocketing. The people already in the room had tried to quiet him, Kleiner finally convincing Magnusson that Kleiner should talk to Barney, and Magnusson had insisted on dragging Alyx out with him, who had already been weakened by her recent bout of emotion and needed a break. She reluctantly left, understanding that she couldn't handle this in the state she'd been in for the last few days, but Gordon had refused to leave his friend's side, and joined Dr. Kleiner in trying to reassure Barney. Eventually, the doctors had determined that nothing was actually physically or mentally wrong with Barney, he was just experiencing too much emotional duress at once, and they'd told Dr. Kleiner and Gordon what Barney had been trying to, that he needed to be alone. When they all left, the doctors included, Barney had curled up in the hospital bed and bawled like he hadn't done since he was a child, a very young one. His mouth open and sobbing, hot tears pouring down his face, not running down his nose, strange, animal-like sounds coming from him as he gasped and coughed and choked for air, Barney Calhoun let the last of his strength fall out from under him as he gave in to the last two weeks.

It was now sometime in the night—the lights were out and he couldn't see the unlit analog clock on the wall—but he supposed his crying fit had ended in him exhaustedly falling asleep, for how long he didn't know. Now he had drifted awake, every part of his body hurting, and his mind unable to shut off and slip back into peaceful oblivion. So he lay awake, in his own private hell, torturing himself with his thoughts, now that the Combine and their stunsticks were gone.

Barney Calhoun was one of those people who are very smart without ever thinking they are. He had grown up in a poor section of Alabama outside of Birmingham, in a section of town called The Alabama Marshes. This was a strange name to give the neighborhoods near where he grew up, and people shortened it to Alamar, which they usually said derisively. Alamar was a bad part of town, where all the poor people who get called things like "white trash" lived. The Calhouns were a big family, the product of the lack of family planning that is often a symptom of poverty, and Barney grew up making little distinction between his various cousins and his gaggle of siblings and half-siblings. He was near the end of the line of children for his mother, third from the last, and his father—well, he knew who his father was, and that was something to be grateful for where he came from. Albert Calhoun was never consistently around, and while Barney never relied on him, he also never really resented him. Truth be told, he had little feeling toward his father at all, and saw him more like an adult friend of his mother's who popped in every once in a while and drank all the beer in the fridge before asking for money and then leaving again. Sometimes he'd share one of the beers with Barney, and from a young age, the younger Calhoun had come to associate the drunken haze that would come over the older man that would lead him to disclosure with the earliest examples he had of male bonding.

Barney's real "dad", so to speak, was his mother's father, Ren, who Barney simply called Pa, the way his mother did. Pa had taught Barney work ethic and drummed into his head that it mattered whether he did right or wrong—one of the few people in an impoverished kid's life who would take the time to see him as worth their effort. When the CPs had been beating him in that tiny cell, it was Pa's voice that had told him, "Don't let them see any weakness or they'll think they've won. I know and you know they haven't beaten you out yet, so buck up and make sure they don't get a chance to think it. That's it, 'atta boy, tell 'em who's boss! Get in another jibe or two and they'll get mad enough they'll give up. They'll hurt ya for it, but you'll have won." Ren himself wasn't a smart man, but he was a good one, and he and Barney's mother had instilled in the young man that he was worth something. In that sense, Barney had something a lot of the kids around him didn't.

But what he hadn't learned from his mother and his grandfather was his intelligence. Barney was born with a natural insight, an ability to read people that is often taken for granted as a form of intelligence, and a gift for strategy. This didn't translate for him into skill with academics, however, because he simply didn't care for school, and as a result, came to believe the assumptions his teachers made that he was mediocre. He did quite well in history when they were discussing wars and battles, but in Alamar, you didn't admit to liking school or being good at it, and the curriculum hadn't gone far enough in-depth into these subjects for Barney's tastes, so without

realizing it, he had made sure people saw him reading trashy magazines in class and stashed nonfiction books about World War II and biographies of Napoleon under his bed to read instead of sleeping at night.

His intelligence caused him a few problems. The most obvious one was that he couldn't respect authority based on authority alone, a skill one needed to get by in life. For someone to get Barney to listen to them, they had to earn his respect, and being smarter than the average Alamar resident caused Barney some frustration. He learned to fight at an early age, and to prevent himself from getting into fights at a later one. He learned early that authority figures in his hometown were often just looking to make the difficulties of life lighter for themselves and consequently didn't care so much about other peopleâ€"a difficult life invites the development of self-interestâ€"so the young man had always questioned authority, sometimes out of youthful arrogance and sometimes, indeed, out of similar self-interest. He learned that when the school principal instituted a policy where he wanted to raise everyone's writing scores by 20 percent, and all the sports games the school partook in were cancelled until they achieved this result, it wasn't because he really cared about his students' progress but because he'd been getting bad statistics quoted at him by the superintendent and was in danger of losing his job, so you wrote your essays about what you did with the principal's mom last weekend. He learned that when the guy at the DMV refused to waive the late fee for his mother's getting her license renewal in late because the post office was messing up their address again, it was because the DMV guy was trying to raise three kids on a DMV worker's salary and didn't care about other people's problems, so you took the spoiled chow mein out of the refrigerator and mailed it to him at work. People in authority positions didn't really care, and so they made stupid decisions; thus, Barney grew up with an instinctual mistrust of authority.

His grandfather and his mother were the exceptions; they cared about him and they put food on the table for him, so out of gratitude, he obeyed them and listened to what they had to say. He wasn't completely averse to anybody he saw as in chargeâ€"the person just had to prove they deserved their position, and Barney would happily do what they told him to, and do it with respect. But in a poor neighborhood, anybody who has real talent or skill gets out as fast as possible and doesn't look back, and so Barney saw few of these individuals.

The other problem his intelligence caused him was that he was aware of the world outside Alamar, outside Birmingham, outside Alabama altogether. People around him were too busy trying to survive, too caught up in the daily hazards of life in the slums, to be able to afford a glance at the world any farther away than down the road.

And Barney had his gaze on the stars.

As a child, he was obsessed with aliens and UFOs, and was convinced that the bigwigs of the worldâ€"he didn't know which, but some corrupt authority or anotherâ€"knew about them. Barney knew the section of the library that dealt with the paranormal and always made a beeline there when he was younger and his grandparents took him; his reality was too full of late utility bills and nightly dinners of Spaghettios for him to believe in any other kind of magic, so the

possibility of extraterrestrial life sufficed. The question of what aliens would be like when we met them exercised his brain, and conspiracy theories were a natural fit for his distrust of The Man in all his various forms.

He didn't tell anyone this, of course; that would be inexcusably weird and would get him called a nerd, and then he'd have more fights with other boys to deal with than he cared for. He kept his fantasies about making the first contact a dearly-held secret for years, and when people told him he was dumb, he didn't know enough to realize that imagination and a questioning nature were signs of intelligence, and he believed them.

Barney had been one of those kids who could grow up to be just another unremarkable story of Alamar, but the other aspect of him that set him apart was his fierce desire to get out. Because he could see the world beyond Alamar, he knew there was something worth working for, and if it hadn't been for this, he might have grown into just another beer-bellied mechanic or a young father who spent most of his time in jail, like most of the men in his neighborhood. But by the time he was in his mid-teens, he realized that to get out of the slums, he'd have to work his way out, and while his GPA was virtually nonexistent from years of slacking, leaving college out of the question, his knack for fighting and his ease at reading social scenes made him a natural for security work. He could have been a bouncer at a club when his dream of being a cop faded, but his secretly burning quest to be the one who knew the secrets of Area 51 or one of the otherâ€"probably innumerable, he thoughtâ€"secret government bases led him to find a job with a research facility in New Mexico called Black Mesa. Barney had started cleaning himself up by that point, ditching the attitude and trying a little harder than he was used to in everything he did, and it was starting to pay off. He got a salary increase within six months of being there, and was soon transferred to the presiding shift on the day of a big experiment. The rest was history.

A sad, crappy history, he now thought.

Barney could put up with a lot, and he had during the fight against the Combine. He was a resilient person, and people often called him the morale-booster of the Resistance, because even when everyone else was discouraged, he remained determined and steadfast in his own un-showy way, sometimes even boosting everyone else's moods with his dry quips about their situation or the odd well-timed antic. One weekend, after they'd had three straight weeks of intense fighting, he'd dug up a few microphones, a beat up old stereo and a screen, and had Alyx do some nifty computer work that would transcribe the lyrics of a song, more or less, onto said screen, allowing Barney to throw an impromptu karaoke night. The modest amount of alcohol he'd plundered from the Civil Protection's incentive supplies had gone a ways toward easing everyone's moods, but what really did the trick was watching Elwood, one of the Vortigaunt mechanics, sing Celine Dion in his grating, gravelly voice, and finding out Eli was a Jimmy Buffet fan.

But now there was no one to cheer him up, and if there had been, he wouldn't want it anyway. Right now he needed to stew. His mind was still reeling from the news: Eli, dead. How could it be? It wasn't that simple to take Eli Vance out, there'd been enough assassination attempts and random attacks on places he happened to be staying that

Barney had lost count of them. The old man had lost his leg once, but had still made it to be...well, an old man, and despite Eli's insistence that he was getting weaker and less useful with his age, no one had seriously believed he was nearing the end of his life, if only because they didn't want to.

Barney had steadfastly maintained faith in Eli for the past twenty years, as Eli grew ever more in importance to, and involved in the leadership of, the Resistance. When Eli had asked Barney to spy for them in the Civil Protection, it had been a huge burden to ask Barney to take on and Barney had understandably taken some convincing. Barney had been a trusted and popular officer in the Resistance for years when Eli had told him he was the only person who could do this, and playing the part convincingly would involve letting most of the Resistance think Barney had actually turned on them and gone to the enemy. Having all the Rebels know that one of the patrol officers in City 17 was a mole left far too many opportunities for someone to actually sell out or, more likely, get hauled into Nova Prospekt and interrogated to death for Resistance secrets. Only a handful of trusted higher-ups and people who would be directly dealing with Barney could be allowed to know, so Barney had sacrificed his standing in the movement—"not only his popularity, but the trust people had put in him, knowing that once he was finally allowed to reveal his true role, he might still not get it back"—for the sake of getting them information and interfering with Civil Protection's operations. It had been a smart calculation, if harshly utilitarian, and Barney had finally agreed with the understanding that this work was needed and that Eli would tell him everything he wanted to know when the time was right.

Because Eli clearly seemed to be getting directions from some source Barney didn't know about. Dr. Vance and one or two of the other members of the highest echelons of the Resistance sometimes came up with plans that called for unusual requirements and wouldn't reveal how they suspected—or knew—that the move was needed or from where they'd gotten certain information. There was an understanding in the Resistance that the sources of these plans and information not be pried for; a great deal of trust was required in, and generally given to, these people, and none moreso than Eli Vance. Barney was not a dumb guy, and if anybody else in the world had been leading a movement he'd been following in this way, Barney would have had none of it, or at least let it be known he was unhappy with it. But Barney and Eli were friends in their personal lives—besides the phenomenon where being a Resonance Cascade survivor turned into a sort of club where everyone acknowledged the survivors shared experiences and feat of survival, even before the Incident, Barney had had dinner a few times at the Vance's place—and Barney had seen firsthand how Eli had been affected by the Event. Eli had been keenly aware of not only the practical but the moral consequences of the catastrophe, and more than anyone else, in Barney's opinion, had worked to learn from it and set things right.

Barney trusted Eli's judgment and morality deeply, and when Eli asked him to essentially break off little pieces of his soul every day for several years to help the Resistance and promised him answers, Barney believed him. At times that faith was all that got him through the job. Even after Barney had made the necessary mental adjustments and done his best to get used to the new role he was in, years into the job he would sometimes have crises of conscience and doubt in the necessity of his task brought on by some daily atrocity or weariness

of the taxing nature of the long-term routine. At those times he'd ask himself why he obeyed his gut-wrenching orders, and as the years went on, more and more often the only consolation he could give himself was that Eli would eventually tell him why they were doing this, why he was forced to watch back-alley executions of groups of civilians and not interfere as they cried silently, the futility of fighting for their own survival written all over them, and then were killed in a horrifying, depersonalized, unnecessary and undignified way.

Barney had looked up to Eli. Everyone did; it was hard not to. And unlike everyone else in the Resistance, to Barney, Eli was a friend. In the world they'd been living in for the past two decades, people's attachments to each other were less solid than they had been before the War. People died constantly, often without a moment's notice and in trivial ways, leaving not only the logistical problems of who was going to fulfill that person's roles or supply their skills and retain their knowledge, but also the emotional spaces in a person's mind empty. No matter how close you got to a person, you always half expected them to die, because it was a statistical probability; you couldn't afford to get attached to someone for a stupid reason like their having been around longer than everyone else.

Accordingly, everyone had a few people--just a few, because the human heart and mind can only trust so much--who they trusted not to die. Often they were your surviving family or your best friends, people you fought alongside more often than anyone else; the common thread was that when a disaster struck, they were the people you could count on to survive. Eli was one of those people for Barney.

And now he was gone. Not only had he deprived Barney of the answers he so desperately wanted, but he was, in the same act, abandoning him, abandoning them all. Hadn't Eli told them everything would be okay, that they would win, despite all the odds and sacrifices and pain and everything else, that it would all pay off, all be worth it? Then why wasn't he here to see the end of the conflict? He had broken an implicit promise, one so confidently trusted in that Barney had never had to even realize it was made, a promise that Barney had relied upon to get through his role and the daily horrors of life under the Combine.

And on top of that, Eli had asked a lot of Barney. He had asked a lot of all of them, but Barney...Eli knew Barney's strengths and weaknesses, and asked Barney to use them all whether Barney wanted to or not, to get them to this point. Barney had been a willing pawn, knowingly consenting to the chessmaster's command with the faith that he would be used well, and if he wasn't, it would be worth it. Hadn't Eli even joked, to ease the mood when making such a horrible request, that working undercover in the Civil Protection could fulfill Barney's lifelong desire to be a police officer?

Barney had wanted to be a cop since he was thirteen. Thirteen is a strange age for everybody; the body suddenly asserts its adulthood, and the mind eagerly tries to play catch-up without any clear set of guidelines on how to do so. Barney was at that perfect storm of an age where he had the adolescent thirst to prove himself and the nerve to try, but not the smarts or life experience to pull it off. He was good at solving his own problems with other kids and sticking up for himself and others, but some kids his age one time had said he was

all talk and wasn't really "bad", that oh-so-coveted adjective that middle-schoolers in the early 1990s wished so earnestly to achieve, and had dared him to steal a cassette tape from a store in the local mall. The test was two-fold: he had to not only steal a tape, but one by an appropriately "bad" artist.

Barney had gone into the store, the others waiting outside, trying so hard to look cool and tough and bad, but his palms were sweaty and his heart thudded unpleasantly in his chest. He had strolled to the back of the store, so as not to be seen by the gum-chewing teen at the front register, and browsed the racks. He wasn't stupid enough to think he could get away with a Vanilla Ice album, but what about MC Hammer? Was he bad? Prince was cool, but was he bad? The young would-be delinquent had finally made the woeful decision to go with a Sir Mix-a-Lot tape, and when he stuffed it in his pocket and strolled out with it in as casual a way as he could muster and the store sensors didn't go off, he thought he was home free.

But just his luck, a copâ€"not a mall security cop, but an actual, off-duty police officerâ€"had been watching him through the window the whole time, and said Barney had had the look of a nervous kid trying to shoplift all over him before he even set foot in the store. The shaking and stomach-flips Barney had experienced making his way to the exit had been nothing compared to how his stomach now seemed to have vanished, his legs went numb, and a sudden lightheadedness swept over him. Confronted, Barney couldn't speak, and so he just handed the cassette over and let the cop lecture him as Barney stared, head heavy with the weight of shame, at his shoes. He felt his throat clenching painfully, but oh God, no, he would not cry, getting caught was bad enough, but maybe if he could try to seem tough as they were hauling him away, when his friends found out he'd spent the night in a jail cell, he'd be the baddest kid in the whole school (such were the workings of a thirteen-year-old boy's mind).

He straightened up, managed to stare the officer in the chestâ€"his face was too much, and afterwards, Barney would never remember what the man looked likeâ€"and tried his hardest to be brave. The officer saw clearly how scared out of his mind Barney was, but at the young man's heroic attempt at stoicism, he just couldn't do a thing to the kid. He read Barney's attempts at being brave and the fact that the kid hadn't run as willingness to deal with the consequences of his actions, and a seasoned cop can tell a real bad guy from a good kid trying to be bad in a heartbeat. He told the young man, "Look, kid, you're too young to have a rap sheet, and a discount cassette tape isn't worth juvie hall. You look like you're a good kid, you just got some dumb ideas. How about this: I'll let you off this once, but if I ever see you doing something stupid again, I'm gonna come down on you hard."

Barney's mind had heard the offer of clemency as one sees a beacon's light through a thick fog twenty miles away, but his panicked brain clearly registered the latter threat. The officer gave him a strict warning and said that he remembered faces exceedingly well, and if he ever saw Barney in the police station being brought in for something, he'd take it personally, but for now he wouldn't even take down his name.

The officer left Barney standing there with a parting of, "Don't do anything else stupid," and once Barney had had a good half-minute of

standing in the same spot feeling the life return to his body, he ran into a nearby men's room and bawled as quietly as he could. Once the panic left him, though, he assessed the situation. He hadn't been successful in his first foray into a life of crime, but he hadn't been hauled off either. The stupid idiots who had dared him had abandoned him and run off, probably after seeing the cop loitering outside, Barney now realized, so at least his humiliation hadn't been witnessed and he could probably make up a lie about what had happened. His reputation with the other guys wasn't ruined, and he would suffer no negative consequences of his attempt at shoplifting.

Barney sighed in relief and began to try to steady himself with big gulps of air, since in the past ten minutes, his lungs had seemed to be on vacation. Then guilt and self-hatred set in, although whether it was for failing or even trying, he wasn't sure. How could he have ever looked his mother in the face again if he'd been written up for shoplifting? How incredibly ashamed Pa would have been...probably enough to disown him. What a stupid way to act as thanks for all they'd done for him. He made a promise to himself then and there that the cop that had busted him would never have a reason to deliver on his promise to "come down hard on him", and resigned himself to the idea that he wasn't very good at crime, even petty theft. He later found the damn kids who had nearly ruined him in the food court, and when they asked him how he had fared, where the goods were and why he looked so sweaty, he managed to convince them that he had ditched their "stupid" plan to "go all the way" with a girl he'd met who "might even have been in high school", and, because of his recent peek at an older cousin's porn magazines, was able to describe in complete, ludicrous detail how the encounter had supposedly gone, to the crowing approval of the other boys.

Years later Barney realized the cop was just trying to scare him and that his threat had been empty, but it had done its job. Until he was about fifteen, Barney had secretly harbored the fear, whenever he was tempted to do something troublesome, that the cop's promise to remember his face would come true and the officer would throw the book at him if he ever found out Barney had been caught doing something. The thought that he had some fuzz keeping an eye out for him to do only God knows what to him if he did something wrong kept him from going the way a lot of the boys in his neighborhood did, and by the time he realized he'd been tricked into not getting himself hauled off to juvie, he was smarter than to try.

But the cop's act had had a bigger influence on Barney than just keeping him on the straight-and-narrow; ever since that day, for years, Barney cherished a secret aspiration to be a police officer. This was a strange thing in Alamar, where cops most often meant trouble, and for a boy who resented authority. But now Barney saw less the time he had seen his friend Max's brother hauled off and given an unfairly harsh sentence for stealing a bike at sixteen, and remembered all the times Mrs. Jenworth down the street had been beaten by her husband until she finally got up the nerve to call the cops and was now had six cats and peace of mind. He saw less the times his aunt had been unable to wriggle out of traffic tickets she might have only gotten warnings for if the cop writing the ticket hadn't seen on her license that she was from Alamar, and remembered how a little girl in his class in second grade had used to be so very quiet and come to school with black eyes, but after looking especially nervous on a Career Day that had featured a woman cop and

which had resulted in the little girl being absent for a time, she had come back smiling and slowly begun to be chatty and outgoing. Cops could be jerks, but they could also be protectors; they could fix the lousy things that went on in people's lives in Alamar. Barney began to take it upon himself to use his ability to read people to diffuse fights, and used his reputation to protect the weaker members of Alamar society.

By high school, his protective nature had led to some kid he'd been telling to back off of a younger boy to call him Cop-Boy Calhoun. Barney scoffed and gave the kid a punch because there were people around and then told the smaller boy to quit wearing that dorky backpack, it made him look like a nerd...but secretly he'd been thrilled. "Cop-Boy Calhoun." Barney the hero, defender of the weak. He secretly turned it into a nickname for himself and fantasized about being a big-shot Chief of Police in Birmingham or somewhere else even bigger...Chicago, maybe! He still had his distrust for authority, but now it grew less generalized and more specific; he'd be skeptical of others when they tried to pull rank on him (he was a teenage boy after all), but not as openly hostile, and if he was given a good reason to follow the rules, he'd generally do it, even if maybe he still tried to see what he could get away with from time to time. The cop who had stopped Barney, by not arresting him, had changed Barney's thinking about the police. It wasn't the fact that the guy had let him get away with something that made the officer a hero to Barney, although for years he couldn't say exactly what had.

Now that Barney had plenty of time to sit in this godforsaken bed and evaluate his life, he realized that what it had been that made the cop seem heroic to Barney was his application of mercy. A policeman was supposed to serve the law, and Barney had thought, until he realized the paradox, that that was what about the cop's actions had inspired him. But even before the Resonance Cascade, Barney began to grow disillusioned with cops and their tendency to follow the letter of the law no matter what the circumstance and complicate people's lives that way for the sake of a petty sense of authority.

Nevertheless, his protective instinct had been realized now, and he sought security work instead, combining his desire to do such a job with his interest in the weird, spooky and supernatural to land a job at Black Mesa. When he saw the behavior of the CPs when they had come about, jumped-up glorified schoolyard bullies who had sold out their fellow humans to protect themselves or for a chance to indulge their thuggish natures, and the way they'd often do something horrible like haul someone in for a beating for making a comment about how stupid Breencasts were (a Code 2-2-4 Loyalty Violation), he had begun to loath what he had once held in esteem. Now he realized what it was that made the cop in the mall different from Civil Protection officers: it was really that the cop had had a heart and realized that Barney wasn't a real threat or in actual need of correction that Barney had respected. It hadn't been that he'd let Barney off the hook; it had been that he had given him a second chance.

Forty-two-year-old Barney had the common sense of an adult and knew that getting busted for shoplifting at thirteen would have branded him for the rest of his adolescence as having a record, and the rest of his life in terms of causing him to perceive himself as less than he did now. He probably wouldn't have shoplifted or tried to do anything illegal again (except for all the underage drinking he did

as a teen, but hey, that was life in Alamar. He'd been a little bit of a bad boy, but never in any way that would compromise his goal of being on the Force in some big city), but the incident would have left him with the idea that, rather than being just another working-class nobody from Alamar who could maybe make something of himself and get out, he was just another working-class nobody from Alamar, and that was all he'd ever be.

The joke about always wanting to be a cop had been a way of Eli reassuring himself as he was asking too much of Barney and painfully aware of it, but with his back against a wall and few alternatives. Barney had lost his aspiration to be a true police officer before he'd even taken the job at Black Mesa, but if he'd thought incidents of police brutality or common petty authority being abused before the arrival of the Combine had corrupted the ideal he held of law enforcement, CPs turned his ideal into something vile and revolting, something perverted from its original sense beyond recognition, and he hated them all the more for it. When Eli had asked him to pretend to sell them all out, to submit to that system that stood for a corruption of his dream, it had made him sick, and the joke, ironic although Barney knew it was, had felt somewhat cruel.

To ask Barney to submit to that damned institution knowing his one-time dream...Eli had said he was the perfect, the only man for the job. He was right, of course, although Barney carefully had avoided thinking about whether that was a true compliment or not.

"I need someone as smart as you, Barney!"

"I ain't smart, Doc, you're surrounded by PhDs, get one of them to do it if you want someone smart, I'm an idiot!"

"No, no, Barney, I need someone with your intelligence, your way with people...you can read people, Barney, you can get them to do what you need them to. All these scientists you're talking about, they might have the degrees, but they don't have a lick of common sense; they'd get killed walking in the door of the recruitment building! I need someone who can fool the Combine, someone who can play the part and keep his head about it."

"Gee, thanks, Doc, I'm real proud you hold me in such high esteem. If you think I'm such a damn good liar why don't you give me a goddamned Emmy and send someone else to stunstick innocent Vorts!"

Barney had only actually shouted at Eli once or twice before, but that night, almost eight years ago, Barney had cursed and yelled and fought back with everything in him, because as far as he was concerned, he was fighting to protect his own humanity. Eli knew what Metrocops did, knew how much everyone, Barney especially, hated them-how could he ask Barney to do this? Eli had pleaded with him, and when that didn't work, he pleaded with Barney not to make Eli make him take the position. That was the first time Barney allowed himself to admit that Eli was getting old, and when he had had to feel all over again the unpleasant shock of a child who realizes their parent isn't perfect. Eli had finally convinced him by telling him that part of his job would be to inform the Resistance of planned raids on their hideouts and to sneak supplies to them. Telling him of the lives he could save and appealing to Barney's sense of duty to the greater cause had eventually convinced the logical side of Barney

that this was a step that had to be taken, although all the rest of him bucked and fought and screamed against it.

And now it was over. Thank God. Thank _God _almighty. Barney had never been a religious person, and most people had given up any remainder of a belief in a higher power after twenty years of wondering why it would put them through an ordeal such as Earth had been through, but Barney almost wished, now, that he had something to worship, to sing praises to for thanks that he no longer had to play the part of a Civil Protection officer. When he had realized he was being taken into their custody, Barney had been fearful, to be completely honest, of what they would do to him. He knew it wouldn't be sophisticatedâ€"the dumb thugs were likely to be clumsy in their sadismâ€"and he'd been right on target. He loathed the people he was surrounded by in the CP, and now that they knew his game, he was free to let them know it, and since they now hated him for being a traitor, a battle had played out between Barney and his captors, pitting the fear of people who knew they were traitorous sell-outs against humanity and the brutality they had learned from their invaders versus the relative peace of mind of someone who, if he had done horrible things, at least had done them to undermine the destruction of that same precious thing, and all the fortitude he derived from it. It hadn't been a lot, but it had been enough for Barney, who relished that at least he got to tell these pathetic little wretches what he'd always wanted to.

"Hey Simons," Barney had taunted one of them, recognizing one officer from City 17 he'd been stationed with from time to time among the men clustered around him with stunsticks, "you know I read the citizen profiles of everybody in the unit to pass along to the Rebels? You know what I read about you? I heard you had a sister who got shot by the Patrol in City 14 five years before you joined. Said she was suspected of being Resistance. Now you and I both know they put that down on the Incident Reports of anybody who gets in the way, but did ya ever wonder if she really was with the Resistance? Ever wonder, when you were shooting at Rebels, if one of them had a brother like you? Or did ya ever meet one of the guys from City 14 and wonder if they were the one who pulled the trigger on her? Kinda makes ya wonder how you got here." That had earned him five straight minutes of screaming nerve endings as Simons had taken out his rage on Barney and his smart mouth, but when it was over, Barney had laughed as much as he was able, spitting out blood, and added, "Did I hit a sore spot?" And Pa, in his mind's eye, slapped him on the shoulder and said, "That's my boy."

It had been worth it. The game involved a delicate dance on Barney's part between how much he could antagonize the little worms who had him in their grasp and whether he could survive their retaliation. But he had survived, survived and told them what he thought of them to boot, so he had won.

Didn't mean it had been fun. All the brutality they had used on the job tormenting civilians, they had used on him. Barney had known they would treat him the same way they had treated the common people they were allowed to exercise the authority of the alien regime on, and he'd been scared, but he'd made it through. Didn't mean it had been a walk in the park.

He had had to coax himself through the motions of the brutality when it had been his job, and been lackluster at it, because he could

never turn himself over to it fully, the way the other recruits had to maintain their own sanity. They'd blocked out their emotional responses to the carnage and misery they had to inflict, learned to like it until it was true, for the sake of keeping their minds, but Barney had refused to do so. They might have kept their minds, but Barney kept his soul, kept the humanity they had given away, by refusing to get used to the violence and myriad daily cruelties; in allowing himself to feel the guilt and self-hatred and sickness of each one, he kept himself whole. The other CPs, the real ones, didn't have that anymore and envied him his hard-earned righteousness, so they'd done their best to inflict the rage they felt at themselves, if only buried deep down, on Barney.

Barney thought of the treatment he'd just endured. He thought of what he'd had to do on the job to maintain his cover. He thought of how, even when he'd been able to break his cover, when the Uprising started, the Rebels had been hesitant to trust him, he who was, as far as they knew, formerly a Golden Boy of the Resistance, with almost as much faith invested in him as in the One Free Man, but who had gone to the other side. He thought of how he couldn't have the answers he'd been promised, and how Eli had left them and how none of this would have happened if the goddamned scientists at Black Mesa hadn't been so intent on blasting a hole in the universeâ€"and his rage at Eli grew.

But that wasn't right, that wasn't okay. Eli's death was too new, his loss too recent, that wound too fresh, for Barney to hold Eli culpable. He couldn't feel that resentment yet, and so he searched around for another target to deflect it towards...

...and landed on Gordon.

If Barney was the second fiddle, Gordon was the damned little child prodigy soloist who played the lead and got all the credit, even though the song wouldn't sound half as good without the backup. Gordon had just shown up into the middle of this and saved the day, and people were worshipping him like he was some skinny, nerdy little Jesus Christ. No one knew where he'd been all these years, but he hadn't been here, in the thick of it, fighting every day just to buy time until the cavalry came, beating the odds by surviving this for twenty years, selling himself and his principles to just keep fighting like the rest of them hadâ€"like Barney hadâ€"and now he was getting all the glory. Where was Barney's fanfare? Where were the faces shining in admiration when he met them, the people saying, "Barney Calhoun's here, we can handle this now!", the Breencasts touting him as a wanted criminal, to be hunted to death? (Barney didn't know that now that Eli was gone, he himself was Anticitizen Number Two, second only to Gordon and outranking even Alyx on the Combine's most-wanted list for his symbolic value as a traitor.) It was true, Barney rarely needed or valued this kind of recognition, but in his frantic attempt to redirect his anger, it was all making sense, the fire a soothing purge of the detritus of unresolved resentments against his mentor.

He completely forgot the rage Gordon had gone into to protect him when Gordon had seen Barney's condition, how Gordon seemed to need him, to see him as an anchor. His mind disregarded the drunken laughs they'd had back in the day while Barney had been filling in the gaps in Gordon's pitiful understanding of women, how the fumbling scientist's quietness and clumsiness had led Barney to bring him

under his wing at Black Mesa, how glad Barney had been to see Gordon return and how he'd wanted to reassure the poor guy when he'd seen the look on his face that dayâ€|. .

When Barney had stopped him from getting on the train and pulled off his mask, Gordon's face had looked lost and scared beyond belief, and then showed relief at recognizing Barney. Then, as Gordon's eyes travelled over Barney's face and took in the uniform, the confusion had come back full on. He'd looked, if possible, more lost and frightened than before, and asked, "Barneyâ€|what theâ€|what in God's name is going on?"

His voice had been a shaky whisper, and he'd glanced around him as he said it as if the wrong people might overhear them. Barney had told him, "Hey, don't worry, buddy, I'll get you someplace safe. I'm just pulling up Dr. Kleiner now. Damn, it's good to see you again, though. Ya glad to be back? Althoughâ€|hehâ€|I guess things aren't just the way you left them. Sorry about that." Then he'd winked, but Gordon just seemed dumbstruck.

Barney had figured the poor lug had been disoriented, and went back to the computer terminal thinking that Gordon needed the rest and remedy Dr. Kleiner could provide. Maybe Gordon had been briefed and it came with some bad news he wasn't expecting or something, or maybe he'd been briefed incompletely. That was unlikely, though, Barney had reasoned at the time; surely, one didn't give a man a job like this to do and only give him partial information about the situation.

After that, Barney hadn't had a moment's break to catch up with his old friend; every time he thought he'd have a chance, some new calamity occurred and they had to fight to stay alive again. But now that he had the time to think, Barney began to suspect that there was something very wrong with Gordon, and it was terrifying in someone who was supposed to be their savior.

Gordon still seemed...what exactly was it? Unfamiliar with the situationâ€"with the Resistance, their assets, their enemy, the War itself, sometimes even the whole goddamn world they were living in. He tried to hide it, but wasn't very good at it. He seemed to be playing it by ear in everything he did, and as Barney reflected on this, instead of admiring Gordon's pluck and adaptability if it were true, the thought added fuel to the fire. How much painstaking planning and late nights full of careful preparation had Barney been a part of as a leader of the Resistance and undercover agent for so long, how many chess pieces had had to be moved and pieces lost just to get them to the point they were at now? And Gordon had reappeared and blown up the Citadel a week later. All that meticulous strategizing the Resistance had been through just to stay alive, and Gordon just wandered into Nova Prospekt with a handful of grenades and started a freaking uprising. They had all been carefully maneuvering around a floor filled with shards of glass, trying to get to the open door at the other end of the room, and Gordon seemed able to just stomp through it, oblivious to all the caution they'd taken. (If he had been in a more rational mood, Barney might have considered that Gordon's actions were possible only because Barney and others had carefully played their chess game, and now the climax of the game was sweeping along to its conclusion due to the scenario they'd been able to lay out for him to work with. But the bitterness of his angst wouldn't allow room for rationality, or it would have

allowed itself to be directed at Eli. So goes resentment.)

And Gordon seemed unsure about what he was doing here, or what he was supposed to do. He had acted surprised for the longest time that people knew who he was, and while Barney knew him to be modest to a fault, it didn't equate to the alarm Gordon seemed to be trying to hide when people talked about his anticipated role in the War in front of him. Why would Gordon put on an act like this? Barney thought hard about that last part, because it didn't add up. Chewing it over in his mind, the look on Gordon's face when Barney had first found him again popped once more into his mind and didn't seem to want to go away. He added the two pieces together, and... wait.

Wait a minute. No. Oh no. No, that was crazy. It was impossible! Did Gordon really not know what he was supposed to do here, was he really unsure about what had happened to Earth in his absence? Was it possible no one had told him what had happened and what he was here to do, or how to go about doing it? It was absurd, and more than that, it was frightening. Luckily, Barney hit upon another solution: no one knew where Gordon had been for 20 years after the Black Mesa Incident; maybe he'd been somewhere where something that had been done to him had left him disoriented or affected his memory. The idea of Earth's messiah simply flying by the seat of his pants was alarming enough that amnesia or trauma-related shock seemed plausible and a more desirable alternative. Maybe Gordon knew things all the rest of them didn't, and it was why he kept so quiet; he was protecting them from the knowledge that had blown his own mind. Maybe he'd been told how things would turn out and was scared—"no, that was a frightening idea too"—maybe he'd been subjected to some kind of training in preparation for his task that had left him meek and unsure, but a veritable killing machine when he needed to be.

But no, there was something wrong with that, too. Barney searched his mind for it. He recalled Gordon getting off the train. His appearance...he'd been wearing standard issue civilian clothes, but moved in them like he wasn't used to wearing them, the prison-like uniforms that made you feel vulnerable and faceless, so you shrank into the background of any space you were in so as not to be noticed. Gordon had normally done that back when Barney had first gotten to know him at Black Mesa, but now it was a skill everybody had learned to a higher degree than Gordon had used, and he didn't seem to have the hang of it compared to others. And he'd looked worn...he'd even had what looked to Barney like mostly-healed wounds from the fight at Black Mesa. Barney had helped Gordon handle the horrors there a few times, and at one point, in a skirmish with some Marines, Gordon had had a near miss with a bullet when the wooden crate he'd been using for cover had splintered under enemy fire and a shred of wood had slashed his temple. When Barney had caught up to Gordon a few hours later, the wound looked, accordingly, a few hours old. But when Gordon had gotten off the train in the station, and Barney had gotten a better look at him...the wound had mostly healed, the scab shrinking but still visible. It looked no more than a week or even a few days old. Which was impossible. But it was exactly the same cut, Barney was sure of it; it was in the same place on Gordon's head and shaped in the same unusual slicing shape as the one he'd gotten from that crate.

And there was the coinciding matter of Gordon's age. Barney had been a few years younger than Gordon at Black Mesa, but now he looked like a middle-aged man, as he was; Gordon, however, didn't look a day over

twenty-seven, apart from the signs of psychological duress in his face that always let you know a person had been through a lot, regardless of how old they were or anything else.

Here, Barney was forced by the difficulty of the mystery to give up on figuring out what was up with Gordonâ€"except to admit that somehow, Gordon didn't know everything he needed toâ€"and lapsed into more resentful stewing. Gordon was still twenty-seven years old, with the full remainder of his life ahead of him after the Combine were goneâ€"assuming all the radiation and crap he'd been exposed to didn't give him five kinds of cancer by the age of thirty. Barney had given up twenty years of his life to the fight against the Combine, just like everyone else, twenty years he could never get back, and in which he'd lost the usual experiences and milestones of a normally-progressing life. He hadn't climbed the ladder in any chosen profession, he didn't have achievements accumulated in hobbies he'd taken up, and with the breeding-suppression field in place, he'd never had children.

Barney hadn't been the kind to really set goals for himself at the time of the Resonance Cascade, but like most people, he'd assumed and hoped he'd eventually find a woman he wanted to share his life with and they'd get married and he'd be a dad someday, able to watch little miniature versions of himself and that special woman that was all his grow up, and to take part in raising them. He was part of a whole generation of people whom the breeding-suppression field's effects might have cost the possibility of ever bearing children, as they had spent the bulk of their reproductive years under its dominion.

Barney and Judith Mossman had a contentious relationship, one in which Barney enjoyed making jokes about her unpleasantness that went over her head and where she let him know she was better than him because she had a PhD and he didn't, and liked to let him know he was immature; but one day, a couple years ago, he had caught her sobbing about how she couldn't get along with Alyx and she'd ended up allowing him to listen to her since no one else was around. What had really been getting at her, he eventually unraveled, was that she was nearing the age at which women had used to lose their fertility, back when anybody had it, and some part of her had always wished she'd eventually have a baby. Now that option was fleeing her with each passing day, and while she and Alyx had never gotten along, would it kill that sharp-tongued girl to let Judith show her the equations she'd been working on when they'd had their most recent blow-up, and just pretend not to be threatened by Judith's feelings for her father? Judith wasn't trying to be like a _mother to her, for heaven's sake, she knew full well she'd never replace Azian Vanceâ€"that much had been painfully clear to her for years nowâ€"but Judith had failed at her early attempts to foster Alyx like Barney had, to enjoy watching a child grow up without feeling the resentment that Alyx had Eli's love and Judith didn't. Sobbing onto Barney's shoulder, Judith had lamented that Barney had gotten to partake in Alyx's upbringing, and that she'd never been good with children but she'd always secretly hoped having her own child would solve that, and he was so lucky that, at least if he was in the same boat as her, he'd gotten to help raise a child by proxy.

Barney hadn't thought of it that way, that he was losing years from the precious gift of the ability to produce and raise children that people took for granted until they lost it. Yeah, he'd had Alyx,

but...Alyx was somebody else's child, not his. She didn't have his eyes, and the smile of the woman he loved, he didn't look at her and think, "My God, I made you...I've partaken in a miracle." Alyx was great, and he'd always be thankful she and Eli had sort of adopted him as her quasi-uncle...but it wasn't the same thing.

The woman he loved. He sighed. The woman he loved. Well. That was a whole other bundle of baggage.

At one time, being single would have been great for him. He used to be quite an attractive guy, and before he'd met Lauren, he'd used it to his advantage without shame. Now he was painfully aware (moreso than the people around him were) of the grey creeping into his sideburns and the weariness in his face and body. He had more scars now than most people accumulated in their entire lives before the war, and while battle scars had been a plus when picking up women then, everybody had them now, even the civilians. Everyone knew the difference between a stunstick scar and a slash left by an antlion, and scar collections were no longer sexy but a reminder of everyone's shared misery. He knew he'd have plenty more scars after his most recent escape, and he wryly thought of how 20-something Barney would have proudly used them to woo cute chicks.

"Hey, baby, I spent eight days once getting the crap beat outta me by the Combine for spying for the Resistance. Yeah, my buddy Eli" (here he'd lay a delicate emphasis on the name but wouldn't add a surname, so as to namedrop without seeming like namedropping) "said I was the only one who could pull it off, so I figured I'd do my part. Then they caught me after I came out from under cover and they held me for over a week. I got this one from a bullsquid they were keeping in a cage, see? Don't feel too bad, I held out long enough for my buddy Gordon to bail me out." (Here again, he'd put a slight emphasis on the name and watch with satisfaction as the woman's eyes widened.) "He just needed someone to man the mounted gun on the escape car, and he's a lousy shot, so I got this one when a wound opened up while I was takin' out our pursuers. Ya wanna touch it?"

Barney snorted at the imagined scene of his younger self. Twenty-something Barney surely would have tried something like that, and forty-something Barney thought the little twerp was an idiot. Maturity made him disdainful of his former self, and his current dark mood made him self-loathing and pessimistic.

Yesiree, at one time, this experience would have been sexual capital, and he'd have relished being single to enjoy it. But now he was older. Now he didn't want to spend his weekends scoring with random chicks; now he wished for the security and dependability of being able to return home to the same person every day, someone who knew how he thought and when he needed to be snapped out of his bad moods. A girlfriend would sure be nice right about now, he thought bitterly, and his mind turned back to Gordon, and his best friend's relationship to Alyx Vance. Barney had previously been amused that Gordon didn't know what to do with Alyx's attraction to him and then detachedly irked by his steadfast refusal to do anything about it. Barney hadn't had the chance yet, but had been meaning to bend Gordon's ear about not stringing Barney's de facto niece along. But now his annoyance went deeper than his familial feelings toward Alyx. Alyx was a good kid—a good woman, he corrected himself, once again falling into his habit of thinking of her as a kid instead of the woman the rest of the men on base clearly saw her as—"she had a real

heart to her, and he knew she was probably just what Gordon needed right now. So that little four-eyed Poindexter (he was stooping to such stupid taunts in the depths of his displaced resentment) should be throwing himself at her feet like any other man who might have had Alyx's affections aimed at him would have. And instead Gordon was dragging his feet. What was it with him? Didn't he know what an opportunity this was for him, the skinny little wingman who had relied on Barney's scraps for attempts at romance during the months back at Black Mesa they'd gone out together after chicks?

Barney had tried and tried to teach him how to not be afraid of women, and no matter what, Gordon always ended up tripping over his own feetâ€"and now a girl who every man who met her wanted was throwing herself at himâ€"throwing herself at him (Barney had already told her to ease up on the flirtation because it was embarrassing for him just to watch)â€"and the little geek was still choking! It was incredible; Gordon Freeman had absolutely no way with women, and now suddenly women wanted him like he was a hot movie star. And he, Barney, was damaged goods. Where was the justice? (Barney wasn't aware that now that he'd come back from under cover, the women who had bitterly given up their fantasies of him when he'd gone under had been relieved to reclaim said fantasies, and he was as popular a subject in the women's dorms as Gordon himself. Moreso, even, because Gordon was clearly already claimed by Alyx and the fact that Barney had been spying for their cause made him very attractive in their eyes, and even the grey flecks in his hair were now seen as tokens of his self-sacrifice instead of premature aging. He'd have been mortified to hear the fantasies some of the women had that involved both he and Gordon, but thankfully, he was blissfully unaware of those.)

This wouldn't be happening, this bizarre reversal of the natural order of things, if he still had Lauren.

Lauren had been his girlfriend at the time of the Black Mesa Incident. She'd been wonderful, everything a guy could want in a woman: smart, kind, warm, supportive, always picking him up when he was down. She'd have made a great wife, and everyone around them had just assumed they would get married, including Barney. But when the dimensional rift had opened up between Earth and Xen, all the Xenian wildlife that had gotten through before Gordon could close it had taken a firm hold on Earth's soil, and Earth didn't know how to respond to it. The new lifeforms had wreaked havoc on Earth's biosphere, wiping out species and transforming ecosystems before people had learned how to deal with them. People didn't know at first, for example, that antlions developed extremely aggressive behavior during mating season the first time it had happened, and that had led to a lot of human deaths.

Barney and Lauren had had to maintain contact from a distance after he'd had to go into hiding as a result of his involvement with the Incident, and they communicated through a complex system of communications that the Resonance Cascade survivors had set up to contact the rest of the world in the days between the Event and the Seven Hours War. It was tricky to keep up regular communications with anybody on the outside, and when Barney lost contact with her for a while it was always nerve-wracking. He'd begun to get used to it, though, when, during one of their lapses in communication, some friends near where Lauren was staying came on the radio screen one day with sober faces and hesitant voices. They needed him to identify

a body they'd found, they thought it might be relevant to him. Could he make anything of this picture they'd taken of the corpse in question? And Barney had had to look at the picture of the body mangled by an antlion attack beyond recognition.

It made him sick to his stomach, but the trouble in identifying it left him some wiggle room—"maybe this wasn't anyone he knew? But then he'd seen the tattoo on the intact ankle—"his name in a stylized heart. He had told Lauren not to get that dumb thing—"they weren't even officially engaged yet, why would she want to do something like that?"—but now it let him identify the body that was otherwise too mangled to even tell the gender. Barney's immediate response when he saw that was to pass out and then wake up and be violently ill, confirming the body's identity.

Everybody had given him room to grieve for weeks, and for years it had been a touchy subject. Even now, when Barney's love life came up in question, he was known to darken over and grow quiet and serious, his eyes avoiding people's gaze before he changed the subject as quickly as possible. It was a tragic little paragraph to the profile everyone kept in their heads of an otherwise funny, likeable guy: Barney had lost his Great Love and was still in mourning twenty years later. No one would ever be the same for him.

It was poetic and tragic and Barney had believed it himself. But now, lying in this hospital bed, having made a nearer escape from death than he had in years, and with his whole life on an examining table before him, he could admit that that wasn't the reality of it.

It was the first time he was admitting it to himself and only the bitterness that was now consuming him could make him see it clearly and willingly. He had loved Lauren, sure enough, and she had loved him. The problem was that she had loved him more than he loved her. She was exactly what he needed—"she was a good woman, sweet and affectionate, always looking at him like he was a prince instead of lording it over him that her parents were lawyers and he was from Alamar; she saw the good in him when he didn't see it in himself, and believed in him when no one else did. And he had, like everyone else including her, assumed they'd marry someday. But now he realized that younger Barney had been waiting for Someday without knowing what would show him when it had come. As the monitor by his bedside beeped rhythmically, he now saw that he had been waiting because he hadn't really meant to marry her. He'd just been buying into what everyone else was saying about their relationship, willingly believing it himself, without realizing that he wasn't as crazy about her as she was about him.

That seemed odd, though; he was so grateful to her for being with him, and he knew he didn't deserve her. Maybe that had been the problem; he didn't deserve her. He had tried to feel good about the adoring way she looked at him, tried to be proud when she tattooed his name into her skin. But although he had denied it to himself, those things just didn't seem...what was the word...well, deserved. And it hadn't been deserved because, as much as he loved her, she wasn't The One for him. He would probably have gone ahead and married her, had life happened the way they'd all planned, and maybe even been happy for a few years, or happy enough. But now that Barney was older, he knew what he hadn't when he was twenty-two: gratitude isn't the same as love, and he'd have been stuck in a marriage that was all about going along with everyone else's expectations of them, and

hers, but never his. He'd have spent years eagerly going along with her plans, watching her go onto bigger things than him while he tried to figure out his goals that would have been wildly different than she expected. He'd have played the good husband, maybe even had kids, but he'd always wonder, in the back of his mind, why he wasn't happy. He knew now that eventually they'd have grown apart, or she'd have gotten sick of him somehow, and there'd be a divorce and he'd be in his mid-thirties trying to figure out where to go with his life now that he could live it for himself. The difference would have been that he'd have wasted ten or more years of his life living a lie. Barney loathed himself for thinking it, but as much as he hated how the world had changed on the day of the Resonance Cascade and how much he'd mourned Lauren's death, maybe they had been good for him, in some sick, fatalistic way.

He still didn't have anything to show for himself—"well, no, maybe that wasn't entirely true. His feelings from a few minutes ago about how he'd gotten so little of what he wanted out of life looked different now, after considering the alternative. He had done something he'd believed in, hopefully saved some lives, maybe taken the right ones, and now they were on the brink of victory. And once they won, maybe he could find that Great Love he'd never had and start living the life he could have had if none of this had happened.

But wait, no, that wasn't likely. His mind wasn't in a mood to be optimistic, and it now reminded him that most people didn't ever find their Great Love. Relationships like that happened in movies and books, rarely in real life. He knew a few people it had happened for in real life, but the reason people loved that kind of thing was because it was so rare. Barney wasn't the type of person, he knew, who could have a romance like that. He was a very average, typical guy, nothing special about him. He wasn't the best at anything; he didn't have any interesting quirks or a mission in life or a Greater Purpose. The tragedy wasn't that he had lost his Great Love, but that he'd never had one and probably never would. He wasn't interesting, and Great Loves only happened to interesting people.

People like Gordon and Alyx.

Resentment flared up in him again in a way that, strangely enough, made him want to cry. He couldn't begrudge Alyx that relationship, she was a good person and like family to him. What was grinding his nerves right now was that Gordon wasn't an interesting person either. Sure, he was smart, a friggin' genius, but that didn't mean he was interesting. When Gordon walked into a room, no one looked up, and if he knocked over a piece of furniture, as he was wont to do, people would say, "Hey, when did Freeman get here?" People leaned in to hear him speak because he talked too quietly, and unless he was talking about science, he wasn't verbose. He was completely bewildered—"rightly so" at the hero-worship people were lavishing on him, and didn't know how to respond to it, didn't know how to be the hero or leader people wanted him to be. Barney could have risen to the occasion, and he had, numerous times, over the years he'd been an officer in the Resistance. Maybe Barney wasn't the type to get to have a Great Love, but what made Gordon one instead?

Maybe Gordon knew he wasn't and that was why he wasn't responding to Alyx's advances, Barney thought. Still, he'd been given these wonderful, undeserved and unexpected gifts by fate, and he wasn't

leaping at them like anybody elseâ€"like Barney, dammitâ€"would have. The little dope should just be grateful, like Barney would have, and learned not to ask questions but just take the opportunity. He was one of fate's favorites, and Barney was just another of millions of people that couldn't be acknowledged individually; shut up and take the bounty, Gordon.

As if summoned by his thoughts, a gentle, barely perceptible knock sounded at the door. The door opened a crack and a head popped in from the dark hallway into his light-filled room.

"Barney? Are you awake?" a voice whispered.

Barney was so lost in his own thoughts he wasn't sure how to respond; did he want company? What did one say when someone knocked on the door, again? Alyx saw his eyes open, though, and said, "Can I come in?" Barney sighed. Unable to make even this decision, he shrugged his shoulders and Alyx took that as permission to enter. She closed the door behind her, her hands remaining behind her back. Her face, turned downward, looked miserable. She looked like she was trying to say something. She gazed with a torn expression at him lying in the bed. "Can I...?"

And somehow, Barney knew what she wanted to ask. She was asking to snuggle.

He had been one of maybe four people since the Resonance Cascade that she had ever considered it okay to cuddle with. She had been five when the Incident happened and her mom was lost, and sometimes a kid just needed to snuggle up to someone who could tell her corny knock-knock jokes to try to cheer her up. The last time she'd allowed herself to cuddle with him had been when she was ten and a there'd been a bombing raid near the outpost she and Eli had been staying at, and Barney had just made it back in one piece from his duties elsewhere. She'd been worried about him, and while she had sat through other bombings before and gotten to be good at riding them out, she'd been too concerned about him to do that that night. He'd come back, at last, and she'd thrown herself into his arms on a couch in the living room of the abandoned house in the woods that served as the outpost, and, exhausted, he'd squeezed her and rubbed her back, incredulous that he'd made it running that far through the blitz, while she had dozed into a fitful and restless sleep. A few hours later, Eli had found them and woken them up, his gentle voice full of a smile as he said, "Baby, why don't you get to bed and let Barney go take a shower, mm?" She had squeezed Barney tighter, and he'd sleepily mumbled, "'Salright, Eli...let the kid sleep." Eli had chuckled and thrown a blanket over them. That had been fifteen years ago, though, and afterward she had started to grow older and realize cuddling with anybody was awkward at her age.

But they had both been through a lot since they'd seen each other last. Barney had gotten used to the young woman Alyx now was, her face beautiful and confident and her way of carrying herself proud and capable. Now, though, she was looking at him the same way she'd done as a child, her eyes huge and watery and her gaze downcast, and he knew he was doing no better.

Aw, shucks, he couldn't resist; the temptation to make her feel better was too strong, even for this mood.

He feebly lifted his hand up in a "come 'ere" gesture, and she slunk to the bed and climbed in next to his left side, being careful not to hurt him or pull on any wires. Although he couldn't do too much about returning the gesture, she threw her arms around him and buried her face in his shoulder.

"I'm so glad you're okay, Barney," she told him, and her voice was alarmingly watery and weak. She sniffed and said, "I was so scared you wouldn't come back. We all wondered where you were when you didn't beat Gordon and me to the base, but then there was an attack on the base, and then another one...and then my dad..." He winced a little at that last sentence." And then you weren't here and people were saying we had to hold a funeral soon, but I told them you'd kill us if you missed it...and then the party you were leading got in and told us what happened. And I was so, so, _so_..." She seemed to struggle for words here, and Barney was afraid she'd lose her resilience and break down again. But she seemed to be tired of crying so much lately and struggled to choke back the sob that was threatening to loose itself from her throat.

"And then we found out where you were, and I thought...I thought..." She shuddered. " Those bastards. Those _bastards_, Barney. They took my dad from me and I was afraid they were going to take you too. And I couldn't let that happen, and I'm sorry I went all nutso getting you out, but I just couldn't...I couldn't..." He understood. Although he hadn't said anything yetâ€"he didn't feel he had anything to say, and his energy and mood just weren't in itâ€"he gave her a squeeze as best he could with his left arm. She rested her head on his shoulder and wrapped him up in a hug, her eyes closed and her breathing trying to steady itself. He found himself closing his eyes too, and the _beep...beep...beep_ of the machine that was monitoring his heart trilled steadily.

Soon, she spoke again. "Everyone's really glad you're back. They were so upset when they found out. We had to be choosy when we picked who was coming on the rescue mission, or else the whole base's fighting forces would've tried to storm that bunker." He gave what was supposed to be a snort but what he hoped sounded like a chuckle, the feeble little puff of air it was. He was sure of that. All those jerks who had called him a traitor and had been looking askance at him when he passed, all those little snarky know-it-alls who thought they knew the full story and had given him lip back in the streets of City 17â€"sure, they all probably clamored to save his sorry hide. But Alyx went on: "I'm not supposed to tell you this, and don't tell anyone I didâ€"and you have to go along with it or everyone'll be disappointedâ€"but they've all set up a rotating schedule of who gets to give you part of their food at each mealtime. They didn't want you eating hospital rations, and there were people offering to give up a meal at a time for you, but they started fighting about who got to do it and almost came to blows, so they set up a rotation where three people each meal get to give you the best parts of their ration. I have a feeling you'll be getting three servings of meat with each meal," she chuckled.

He was stunned. People were giving up their food for him? He had expected to have to eat the watery blenderized stuff they gave you when you were in the hospital here, but people had actually been fighting about who got the chance to give him the best parts of their meals? He turned his head to the right and sure enoughâ€"how had he not seen it before?â€"there was a plate of food better than he'd had

in ages sitting there, cold and untouched. Someone had to have brought it in while he was asleep and he hadn't noticed it until now. There was meat from what looked like some kind of bird--a seagull, maybe--some kind of green vegetable from a can and--mother of all that was holy, was that actually mashed potatoes? It was probably just the imitation stuff from a box, but when they said the good parts of their meals, they meant it. Barney felt his throat clench; far apart from what he'd been feeling minutes before, he now felt utterly unworthy.

"You have to take it, Barney, and don't tell them I told you! It means a lot to them," Alyx was imploring. Barney had half a mind to argue with the over-the-top gesture, but he couldn't seem to talk right now. He swallowed and nodded. That seemed to content her and she laid her head back down from the position in which she'd raised it to beg him to keep the food.

She sighed, and then they were silent for a few moments. Then she added, "Gordon's really happy you're back too. He was so worried about you." Barney didn't know how he wanted to respond to that statement, so he didn't. He laid there, letting Alyx speak, preventing himself from having any emotional reaction to the words. "He really looks up to you, you know. I think he kind of...needs you. You should have seen the way he went at it when we were putting the plans together to get you out. He wanted them to just give him a bunch of guns and ammo and get out of his way, but we managed to convince him that wouldn't work." Barney smirked. Yeah, that was the way Gordon had been operating lately. Who'd have thought the mousy little whiz-kid from MIT who'd been so meek and clumsy back at Black Mesa would be raring for some ammo and RPGs to go bail Barney out of the bad guys' lair?

"Listen...I know you and I have already been trying to help him adjust, but I really think he does need help. You and I both know there's something weird going on with him, with the not knowing all the stuff he's supposed to know and all that. I think we're all he has, you and I...you know? He was seriously freaked out when he found out the Combine had you--do you, um...you don't remember how he was when we got into the room where they had you, do you?"

Barney vaguely did; he'd been struggling for consciousness at that point, recovering in the aftermath of another fun-session with the CPs. He had a distant recollection of seeing Gordon and then Alyx, not being sure he was hallucinating or not, saying something to them to the effect of, "Hi, guys! What a relief!", and then trying to say something witty, before...something happened. He wanted to say a wild animal had been unleashed in the room or a tornado had touched down or something, but he had a mental image of the Tasmanian Devil from the Looney Tunes splashing blood everywhere with a crowbar.

Huh. Well, apparently, Gordon "Save the world? Who, me?" Freeman had Schwarzenegger-ed out to save him. Aww. That was sweet of him. Despite his earlier feelings, Barney genuinely did feel somewhat touched by his best friend's eagerness to protect-slash-avenge him. Gordon was a pretty solid dude. Geeky, and with no understanding of women, and hopelessly in need of help with this whole messiah thing...but Barney figured he was mostly okay.

He'd just have to earn back his way into Barney's good graces for being all that other stuff he'd been thinking about.

While Barney was sorting this out in his head, Alyx started talking again.

"Look, you and me need to be his support team, you know? Like his advisors or whatever." (_Sidekicks?_ Barney thought sullenly.) "I think we're all he has, now that my dad's gone. You and me and maybe Doctor Kleiner." Alyx hesitated. "And... really... I guess you're all I have now too, Barn. You and Gordon and Doctor Kleiner. But you know how clumsy Doctor Kleiner can be sometimes with feelings, and Gordon... well... I'm not sure what exactly I need from him just yet or how I want to get it."

Barney carefully kept his face perfectly straight and unresponsive to that last statement. Everybody who had watched Alyx and Gordon together for two minutes knew what she wanted from the guy. Barney was not going to say that, however.

"Just..." Alyx was hesitating, unsure, oblivious to Barney's thought process. "Can we help each other get through this? I know you're gonna need help dealing with what you've just been through, and I need help with my dad, and you do too... and then this whole war's gonna get weirder before it clears up, and... I just... I don't know what I'll get from Gordon, but I know what I'll get from you. And I need that.

"I just need..." She hesitated, as if trying to be delicate about what she said next. "We've all got to buckle down and stick together, okay? None of us can afford to check out on the others for a while, even if that's what it feels like we need. Gordon needs you, and I need you. So... I need you to try really hard to be okay. Okay?" She sat up and looked him in the eye, her expression questing.

Barney sighed. She had predicted how he'd react, as uncharacteristic as it was for him. Damn, she was good. Alyx had a way with people, and sometimes it was a little unnerving--she seemed to read your private thoughts sometimes, when you didn't want anybody else inside your head. But she was right. She needed him. Gordon needed him too, and while he was a little bit residually mad at Gordon right now, he knew that would clear up with his mood. The poor schmuck had always needed Barney in some way, since he'd met him, and Barney knew he'd take the weedy little guy under his wing again, just as he had at Black Mesa, and would continue to do so as long as he needed to.

And Alyx. That was the main thing motivating him, now that she'd come to him. The kid was like a little sister to him, and he knew he was the closest thing she had to a big brother. He might be sore on Gordon for the time being, but he'd get through this gloom for Alyx's sake. He hadn't come close to thinking of doing anything dumb, and was fairly sure he never would--except that going into a cave for any period of time was something dumb, after all. For Alyx's sake, he wouldn't do that.

And, you know, The Resistance too. He should probably think about that--no, not now, not for a while yet, he wouldn't think about that. Too much pressure, too many people, too much to give on top of what he'd already given, and still with no end clearly in sight. He'd get to that once he'd dealt with helping Alyx and Gordon.

And so, with Alyx by his side in a hospital bed, Barney Calhoun,

one-time working stiff from Alamar turned hero, beta male extraordinaire, committed himself to continuing to fulfill his duty as the human Resistance's second fiddle. It was a thankless job. But really, he didn't need thanks.

AN-Congratulations, you finished it! Have a glass of water and catch your breath, you deserve it!

On a minorly-related note, while I was writing this over the summer, I saw the trailers for Super 8 and got a crazy idea. Does anybody else think that movie, just by the trailer, looks like a live-action film of Blue Shift? You've got a dude who looks like Barney and even has a twang running around in a police uniform, presumably shooting aliens, while shady government types try to cover it up. I think Valve should sue.

Really, why isn't this bothering anybody else as much as it's bothering me?

...Shut up and go review.

End
file.